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What are your students up to? Survey gives some insight

OLYMPIA — More Washington students are making healthier choices by avoiding alcohol according to a recent survey of kids in our state. But declines in cigarette smoking continue to stall and an increase in new candy-flavored tobacco products is a growing concern.

The Healthy Youth Survey is anonymous and voluntary; it's taken every two years by thousands of Washington students in grades 6, 8, 10, and 12 in more than 1,000 public schools. It focuses on attitudes and health risk behaviors. Topics include drug, alcohol, and tobacco use; gangs; physical activity; suicide; bullying; and more. For the first time, the survey also asked about sexual activity.

"It takes a consistent, coordinated effort to make the healthy choice the easy choice for our kids," said Secretary of Health Mary Selecky. "This survey shows that some of that hard work is paying off and kids are making better choices to improve their health. Of course there are always new generations of kids to reach so the work never ends."

Since 2000, youth cigarette smoking has dropped by half, resulting in about 70,000 fewer smokers. However, these dramatic reductions have slowed in recent years, with 10th grade smoking remaining mostly flat at about 13 percent from 2004 to 2010. Besides cigarettes, youth are using other tobacco products that are often flavored to taste like candy. Among youth who use tobacco, about half report using some type of candy-flavored product. Chewing tobacco use by 10th graders is on the rise, particularly among girls — the rate has more than doubled in the past 10 years to more than three percent.

In the past 20 years, there's been a big drop in 8th and 10th graders who report drinking alcohol in the past 30 days. Since 1990, youth drinking is down for 8th graders by over half, from 29 to 14 percent in 2010. Drinking among 10th graders has dropped from 44 to 28 percent. Since 2008, about 20,000 more youth in 8th, 10th, and 12th grade report that their parents talked to them about not drinking alcohol.

"Underage drinking is a major health concern in Washington," said Liquor Control Board Chair Sharon Foster. "I'm pleased the most recent survey shows a continued downward trend. Statewide efforts the past few years have encouraged parents to talk to their kids about alcohol, because studies show parents are the number one influence on whether teens choose to drink."

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“It’s great news that our collective work in educating parents and kids is paying off,” said Department of Social and Health Services Secretary Susan N. Dreyfus. “When parents and other caring adults talk with and monitor the children in their lives, those children are more likely to succeed in school, stay healthy, and avoid addiction and other problems related to using alcohol or other drugs.”

Alcohol is the primary drug of abuse among youth, but the numbers are declining. Since 2008, there are about 11,000 fewer youth drinking alcohol. The message about the risks of prescription drug abuse is starting to get out there — pain medicine abuse is down among 12th graders.

There’s also more work to do in other areas. When students are depressed, abuse substances, are bullied and feel unsafe at school, they’re less likely to succeed academically. About seven percent of 10th graders attempted suicide in the past year — down from the previous survey. Of 10th graders surveyed in 2010, 85 percent said they felt safe at school.

“Teachers and school administrators have made progress in creating safe and supportive learning environments for our students,” said Superintendent of Public Instruction Randy Dorn. “More of them report they feel safe, enjoy being at school, and have opportunities to become involved in school-related activities. We know when students are engaged in their learning experience and feel safe, they’re more likely to succeed academically.”

About 31 percent of 10th graders and 53 percent of 12th graders in the state reported having ever had sexual intercourse. About eight percent of 10th graders and 17 percent of 12th graders reported they had four or more sexual partners. Among those who had ever had sexual intercourse, about 63 percent of 10th graders and 54 percent of 12th graders reported using a condom the last time they had intercourse.

The survey is a joint effort of the Department of Health, Department of Social and Health Services, Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction, Liquor Control Board, the Family Policy Council, and the Department of Commerce. Results are used to plan, implement, and evaluate state youth programs. [Survey fact sheets](http://www.doh.wa.gov/healthyyouth/reports/default.htm) are online (www.doh.wa.gov/healthyyouth/reports/default.htm).

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